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# POEMS FROM ISOLATION

As the world came to a standstill, businesses shuttered and quarantine enforced, NUVO asked five poets to respond to the pandemic the best way they know how: in words. These poems, song to life and antidote to despair, are woven to illustrate the collective loneliness and uncertainty of the times.

Illustrator  
Makoto Chi





By Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

Naawakwe

there is lake  
melting and  
reforming  
the idea of lonely

there are fires  
smoke from burning sage  
finches at the window  
grey day after grey day

there are endless hours  
marked by leaks  
trout lilies  
cedar

there is contraction  
a pulling back  
into  
only

most of what happens,  
happens again.

at the stopping place  
there is fasting  
expanse  
an escape of one's form

there is a heartbeat  
and a song  
lying flat out  
on the rocks

there are five-lined skinks  
woodpeckers  
intellect  
laid bare

there is a quiet  
a pulling back  
into  
only

most of what happens,  
happens again.

By Karen Solie

After the Workers Are Welcomed Home

When the neighbourhood goes quiet as the country  
Ambulances uneasy in the ambulance houses

Then memory is the bat pulled from under the bed  
And swung wildly, with zero technique  
So contact is felt as pain in the hands

Sentimental heirlooms crashing down  
The tool become a weapon, like the economy.

Time now to acknowledge historic cruelties  
Levied by or against you: it's like cutting  
Your thumb off for eternity with the table saw

A machine so dangerous it has its own branch of  
Litigation. To achieve proficiency  
In a confined space is difficult, a demanding series

Of controlled movements is required to navigate  
The land of the dead, the terrible land  
Of known outcomes. Why go there?

To hear the sandhill cranes.  
To walk around the lake with Mum and Dad again.

By Adèle Barclay

I Lost My Metaphors When She Died

I lost my metaphors when she died  
and had to replace them  
with analogies for how I couldn't breathe  
while breathing

\*

the virus could be an allegory  
but it begets its own grief  
and trains the body to attack its lungs

\*

either way  
coral reef  
mangroves  
have felt this betrayal before

\*

an organism is and isn't an ecosystem  
depending on how you want to visualize  
high-school biology

I remember trying to overlay  
each unit of life unfurling  
across the scale:

DNA, nucleus, cell,  
organ, systems, organism,  
species, ecosystem, biosphere—  
a congruent structure in theory

\*

at the environmental museum  
we used a giant Jenga block tower  
to communicate the concept of biodiversity  
slowly pulling away blocks representing various species  
until the tower tumbled and smashed to the floor

\*

trauma is relational  
and therefore, must be healed in relation  
but the trauma makes being relational  
unbearable

\*

which conditions are lying  
under which conditions

\*



which conditions are tidal

\*

the TED Talk speaker on YouTube  
calls child abuse a pandemic  
we're all too implicated in  
to openly acknowledge

\*

I didn't know she'd die by suicide  
but I knew the conditions  
in which we developed were impossible

\*

that feeling of helplessness is anger

\*

when my body turns to face her  
and she is no longer there

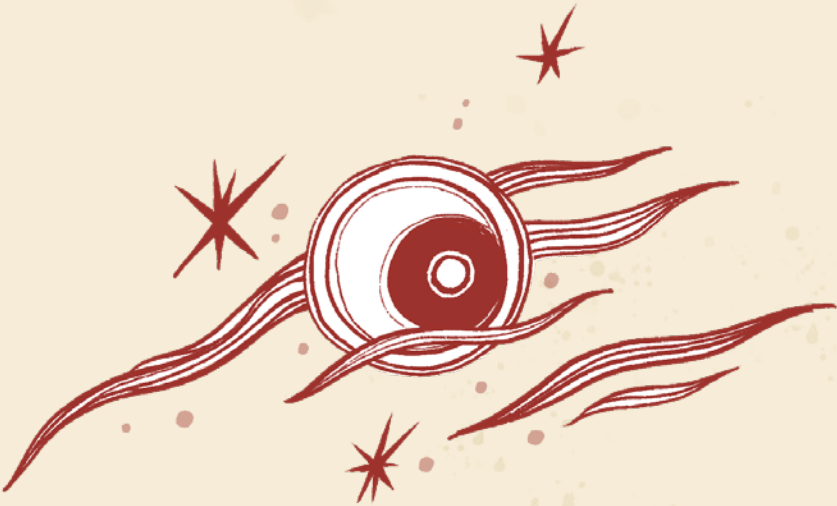
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Some Day in April

after John Wieners

A poem can lie  
when it needs to  
glamour this life

each window  
a law bent  
to the hour



By **Ken Babstock**

Three Skulls on a Patterned Carpet

We shine at these blunt recycled  
mornings, vinegar on the brush  
bristles, astringence, self-denial,

the light’s hymnal or scorpion finds  
us mumbling to an associate,  
in our cell, on our terms, making

our outsider art—though in  
the minds of the churlish, our  
knowing the term should exclude

us. Let them exclude us. We touch  
our common parts, naming  
as we go; sternum, lobe, eczema,

crotch, imagining life on a beach,  
paddling this side of the buoy  
line, the young with their pails

and their fat divers’ watches,  
the cloisonné of the far Labrador  
shore someone’s catafalque

through ice crystal and low fog.  
Dried capelin that smell of hibiscus  
and mown grass, nitroglycerin,

deer spray, and penance.  
Tuesdays we hang from a hook  
he set into the ceiling beam,

dangle and sing, cross-hatched by  
window-grate shadow. Our rib-caged  
nightmares offset the pleurisy,

the inhalations, the raspy laughter  
at the pale day moon. He found  
me here on my own, back before

everyone’s longliner converted to  
crabbing and commodities futures  
was a thing. “We need not be real,”

he’d said, “neither of us. No one’s  
forcing the blood round our circuit.”  
I told him I’d never been strong

on narrative structure. You won’t need  
that here, he assured me, “no event  
can arise between two cancellations—

it’s like putting Time up for winter  
in jars with the rabbit and jams.  
Trust me, you’re no longer named or

believed. The reverb’s turned way up.”

By **Maria Borio**

Nel deserto rosso

In un sonno lunghissimo, mentre il silenzio intorno  
alla zona rossa si allarga, ho sognato di essere un delfino  
che risaliva il Rio delle Amazzoni, entrava in una vena  
segreta e alla bocca del Tevere tornava, affondava, apriva  
le onde nell’Hudson, nel Reno roteava. La sorgente  
del Tamigi e la baia di Wellington erano affluenti,  
di corso in corso la forza del mare si allenava,  
il Fiume Giallo riscaldava la Neva, e su zattere di pino  
i morti scomparivano, nudi, e sentivo freddo ma c’erano  
le stelle, perché nello spazio bruciano ma non riscaldano,  
e potevo toccarle senza morire. Ho sognato tanti corpi,  
i codici, i caratteri, la logica del profitto ancora impressi  
nelle rughe. Poi c’era una cosa più lontana, una scintilla,  
un lampo, un sogno lucido: il cambiamento? Il delfino salta  
molto più del perimetro di una zattera, ogni secondo.

Translated from Italian

In the red desert

In the longest sleep, with the surrounding silence of  
the red zone expanding, I dreamt of being a dolphin  
upstream the Amazon River, entering a secret vein  
at the Tiber’s mouth, sinking, I open  
the waves of the Hudson, spinning the Rhine. The source  
of the Thames and the Bay of Wellington were tributaries,  
the patterning pattern of the sea training itself,  
the Yellow River re-exciting the Neva, and on pine rafts  
the naked dead disappeared, and I was cold despite  
the stars, because in space they burn without warming,  
not deadly to the touch. I dreamt of so many bodies,  
the codes, the characters, the logic of profit impressed  
as wrinkles. Then there was a thing in the distance, a spark,  
a streak, a lucid dream: the change? Every second the dolphin  
jumps much higher than the perimeter of a raft.